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ABSTRACT

There are many issues and problems which arise for dual-career couples during their first professional year. Although the changes confronting most new professionals are typically stressful, when both members of a couple simultaneously enter careers these stresses are frequently exacerbated. Based on both extensive interviews and counseling with many such couples, several specific areas of conflicts and rewards have been identified: (1) difficulties regarding changing role identities, values, self-esteem, and self-concepts; (2) changes in social support groups and in mutual expectations regarding socialization; (3) competition over several areas, including finances, career fluctuations, professional recognition and rewards, and relative status of and advancement in careers; (4) both negative and positive changes in the interdependence of the couple and its ability to function as a mutual support system; and (5) addressing delayed or as yet unresolved developmental issues, such as decisions about lifestyles and parenthood. The nature and the impact of each of these areas is discussed, and positive aspects of such relationships during this time period are presented. (Author)

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The Professional Couple: First Year Out

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The Professional Couple: First Year Out

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The kinds of changes and problems confronting a new professional, although often stressful, are at least somewhat predictable. However, in the case where both members of a couple simultaneously enter their professional careers, these problems can be increased considerably. Based on interviews and therapeutic contacts with many such couples, we have found that most couples believed that they had passed their biggest hurdle just by managing to land two jobs in one location. However, several consistent problem areas emerged during their first professional year. This presentation deals with five major areas of change, conflict and rewards for couples during that transitional "first year out."

Dual career couples are becoming an increasingly frequent phenomenon in our society. These couples are different in some important respects from couples in which one member is career-oriented and the other member is employed but not intent on having his or her own career. The focus of this presentation is on dual-career, or dual-professional couples, although certainly several of the issues described here may be relevant and important to the latter group.[2]

The general issues and problems which are faced by dual-career couples have been described elsewhere (Baum, Presser, & Young, 1978; Hunt & Hunt, 1977; Heckman, Bryson, & Bryson, 1977; Bebbington, 1973; Rapoport & Rapoport, 1969).

[2] It should also be mentioned that the issues described here apply primarily to couples in which both individuals simultaneously enter careers. Other problems arise and some of the present concerns are differentially important when career entrance is out of phase (i.e., one partner begins his or her career while the other is still in training or is already established in a career position). In addition, different issues arise when the individuals are in the same versus in different professions, and when they are employed in the same versus in different organizations.

However, very little mention has been made of the unique stresses and problems which such couples face during their first year as new professionals. Certainly all couples do not experience all or even most of these problem areas. But the themes described here seem to be the result of the personal changes which each individual goes through, the loss of social support systems, and of the necessity to cope with new, often vague environmental expectations and pressures. The combination of these factors puts considerable strain on the individuals and the relationship, and nearly always necessitates change in both.

This presentation will present and discuss five major areas in which changes have been found to typically occur in dual-professional relationships during the first year out. These areas include: changing role identities, changes in the couple as a mutual support system, and individual and relationship developmental changes.

1. Changing Role Identities

The first area of problems arise as an outgrowth of changing role identities. During the first year, each individual must graduate from the role of student (one with which they probably had identified for over 20 years) to that of professional (one with which they probably have had little or no experience). Thus, changes typically occur in the individual's values, in self and other expectations, in self-presentation (e.g., dress, hair length and style, etc.), in one's sense of responsibility, and in one's general perspective on life. Decisions must be made about selecting one's new friends from among those who still seem like peers (e.g., graduate students) or from those who, merely a couple of months prior, had seemed like wise superiors and who are, typically, quite a bit older and "settled." Finally, the transition in role identification seems to be often accompanied by changes in one's self-esteem and self-concept.

The extensiveness of personal changes in any individual's identity typically has impact on the nature of that person's primary relationship(s). However, when both members of a couple are concurrently going through their own personal changes in identity, the nature of their relationship, by necessity, must be redefined.

Although all these changes in identity are important, the changes in self-esteem and self-concept deserve particular mention, as they seem to cause particular stress on the relationship. Berman, Sacks, and Lief (1975), in their lucid discussion of this problem, attribute the stress to the discrepancy which occurs between males and females in the rate of changes in self-esteem. For males, according to Berman et al., changes in self-concept are gradual and begin in graduate school. The transition to professional, therefore, is often not very abrupt and involves relatively slow increases in self-esteem. For females, however, the change in self-concept is highly abrupt and involves a major increase in self-esteem; the step to a professional is often one of qualitative difference. Within the relationship, therefore, one individual is often rapidly increasing in self-esteem and esteem from others, while the other is changing relatively slowly. Thus, the distribution of power, and of esteem and desirability of each individual for their partner can radically and rapidly change from that which formerly existed. Thus, the combination of such changes in self-esteem, in combination with the other changes in role identity, implies that this area can be a major cause of stress in the professional couple's first year out.

2. Social Expectations

The second area of problems for new professional couples concerns changes in their social support system and in social expectations. The loss of the individuals' and the couple's friends is, most likely, anticipated. However, the potential for new friends and the length of time it takes to establish

satisfactory relationships vary. This can particularly be a problem for new professional women if they are in an area in which either few other professional women are present and/or in which norms exist against any kind of personal relationships with males. On the positive side, the dual-career relationship can be, in itself, a support group (this will be discussed later). In addition, individuals who are in dual-professional relationships also have a greater variety of social contacts. They have the potential to form individual relationships as well as relationships with other couples, and can draw from their partners as well as their own contacts with new people.

On the other hand, social expectations may cause some difficulties. The social norms in many communities are more conservative than those in most graduate schools. It may be frowned upon by one's colleagues and/or new community for a couple to live together unmarried, for women to go out alone, or for individuals to have opposite sex friends. For one couple, for example, one partner was clearly told employment was contingent on being either married or single, and nothing in-between. Others have found difficulty in acquiring desired housing or have been ostracized by colleagues.

In addition to expectations by others for the couple, the social expectations of the partners for each other may also change. An individual may not wish to meet the professional obligations of their partner in addition to their own obligations, and this can particularly cause difficulty when one partner is in a profession which has strong expectations for an employee's spouse. More subtly, morover, one partner's desires for the way in which the other socializes can change. If one individual has found it easier to establish new relationships, the other may feel envious, and be jealous of time spent away from him or her. In addition, each person's previous friends were probably known to the other partner and any threat from those relationships was probably

already dealt with. In the first year out, however, not only are the other's friends unknown, and possibly more desirable than "just another graduate student," but one's own sense of self-confidence may be unstable, leaving one less secure than s(he) would feel if s(he) was personally in a more stable position.

3. Competition

Within the relationship competition can also be a problem. Competition seems almost always to be present to some degree in dual-career relationships, primarily because each person is living with a comparison standard in the form of their partner. Every success, from something as minor as a productive meeting or class to a major promotion can be an occasion, on the partner's part, for conflicting reactions of pleasure and envy. Competition seems to occur more frequently when the individual's are in the same, rather than different professions, and most frequently when they are also working within the same organization.

Several areas have been mentioned as foci for competition, not only within the first year, but frequently on a continuing basis. First, competition can occur over money, including salaries, raises, and bonuses. It is often the case that, for some individuals, the measure of their self-worth is equated with financial advancement; it is doubly difficult, then, if their partner advances and they don't. This has been an important issue for many males, as the traditional masculine role centers around supporting his family. Thus, if his partner has a higher salary than he does, this affects not only his basic sense of worth, but also his sense of masculinity and feelings of competence in carrying out his traditionally "appropriate" role. Difficulties for the couple can also be created if career decisions are made on the basis of the larger salary. Such a criteria for decision-making about mobility

suggests that one person's job and, by implication, their career are of secondary importance to the couple and can, therefore, be more easily given up. It is typically not possible to persue a productive career when one must unpredictably give up one's position and start over. It is interesting to note, however, that many females accept the basic premises of secondary importance and salary as mobility criteria and, therefore, choose not to compete with their partner.

In addition, competition can occur for organizational rewards, such as advancement, praise from the boss, recognition for publications, awards, etc. It can also occur over the relative status of the two positions, e.g., Assistant Professor versus Instructor, or Full versus Part-Time positions. Often, members of dual career couples who are fortunate enough to find jobs in a single location find the status of the agencies or academic departments to differ. Particularly when both individuals are in the same field, it is common for only one to be hired in the specialty area, and for the other to "make-do" with a distantly related appointment. In one such couple, for example, one person was hired within the psychology department, and the other was offered a part-time position in administration and part-time in a different but related field in another department. Therefore, differences in status of positions can give one person a distinct handicap, and can make that individual feel even more competitive with their partner

It should be mentioned that competition, in and of itself, is not bad. In fact, it can serve to motivate both individuals to advance professionally, and act as a rich basis for sharing each other's professions. Competition can be maladaptive, however, when one individual consistently feels bad in relation to the other, and when other decisions of the couple are based on professional success. It is especially important, therefore, for dual-professional couples to encourage support for each other, sensitivity to

each other's feelings, and non-competition in other areas of their lives. It also is important that equality in and good processes for making decisions are established. In summary, it seems to be a difficult task for dual-professional couples in their first year to establish a balance in which they can reap some of the benefits of competition but avoid many of the potentially destructive side-effects.

4. Mutual Support System

The fourth area of changes in dual-professional couples occurs in serving as a mutual support system. Clearly, mutual support and sharing are two of the most positive benefits of being in a dual-career relationship. During the first year out, this support means that the move to a new location and new positions, as well as the first few months, are usually easier, less lonely ones than they are for single individuals. It also means that both people have daily new, exciting experiences. Talking about these can open up even long-diminished communication and initiate a pattern of sharing and increased closeness. In addition, the couple has the opportunity to undertake many maintenance tasks together, such as locating and purchasing a home. The sharing and distribution of these tasks, which are typically done only by the female in more traditional relationships, can bring the couple closer as they both work together to establish their new home.

It should be mentioned however, that increased closeness and needs for support can be disruptive in some relationships. This is particularly true of relationships which have been built during times of separation, ones in which the individuals are essentially independent, or ones in which extensive interpersonal support systems are needed but not yet available.

It also sometimes occurs that giving support is difficult when extensive compromises have been made. It is rarely the case in dual-professional relationships that considerable sacrifices and accommodations were NOT made in order

to keep the couple together. These compromises, for example, might include one member moving while jobless and looking for a position in the new community, one person commuting several miles to work, both persons accepting less valued positions than they might have accepted were they alone, etc. In addition to expected effects, the daily reality of these compromises can have unanticipated stressful effects on the relationship. For example, the commuter may find it difficult to establish meaningful friendships in a distant city and thus feel socially isolated; or perhaps the person searching for a professionally acceptable position may have more difficulty than anticipated. This can lead to such problems as increased demands for support, (one partner who feels increasingly guilty), feelings of resentment on both parts, difficulty in sharing the excitement of the one individual's new position, lowered self-esteem and confidence in one partner just when the other's self-esteem is climbing, and probably financial strain.

In addition, the first year is often one of less time and less flexible time to spend together than was true during graduate training. When this decrease in time is considered in conjunction with the increased workload and professional pressures on both members, it may be difficult for the couple to maintain their mutual support.

Thus, although increases in mutual support and sharing are typical of the first year out, there is also the potential of conflict from the accommodations which were made and which are on-going.

5. Developmental Changes

Fifth, problems can arise in some relationships as a function of unresolved developmental issues. This is particularly true for individuals who have only been in the role of a student. In this instance, the transitional year out is analogous to abruptly becoming an adult after a prolonged

adolescence. Therefore, tasks such as becoming financially independent, establishing a career, assuming a position of authority, making decisions about having children etc., all may be occurring realistically for the first time in both individuals when they are in their middle or late twenties.

Developmental changes may also occur during this year in relationships, particularly ones which were formed when the individuals were very young. Often a pattern has evolved in which one individual is highly dependent upon the other. This pattern is disrupted as the couple moves into professional status. Typically, in such instances, the formerly dependent individual rapidly becomes more autonomous, and begins to resent attempts to control or limit him or her. Conversely, the other may either feel threatened by this, or they may push for their partner's autonomy before s(he) feels ready. Other issues related to development also arise. Often, personal growth has occurred at different paces. In addition, it sometimes occurs that the selection of a partner which one would make as a professional adult is different from the partner who was selected when the individuals were younger. The first professional year somehow makes such a discrepancy highly apparent, particularly as each individual is faced with several desirable alternatives.

Finally, it should be noted that many couples decide to begin a family at this stage. Often this means a delay in the women's entry into her profession or a hiatus, either of which can alter her professional motivation or opportunities. In relationships in which child-rearing tasks are shared equally, both individuals' careers may progress more slowly as time and energy are shifted from professional work to the family. When the role of becoming a parent is assumed concurrently with the numerous other role and personal changes occurring in the first year out, the stress on both the individuals and the relationship may be considerable and the time necessary for adjustment can be prolonged.

In summary, the first professional year is seen as one in which extensive changes typically occur in the dual-professional relationship. These changes can be instrumental in causing growth in the relationship. However, the stresses of the first year can also cause difficulties in relationships which are not open to change, in relationships in which communications and renegotiation skills are poor, and/or in ones which are not already healthy prior to the first year out.

This presentation has outlined several areas of change which impact the dual-career relationship during the first year as new professionals. These areas have included issues surrounding changing role identities, competition, social expectations both within and external to the relationship, increases and decreases in the support which the individuals are able to give one another, and general developmental issues. Although not all changes affect all couples nor do they to the same degree, the above represent general areas of change. It can also be noted that there are, as yet, few role models available to help such couples. In addition, the social norms and expectations of the couple's families, the new community, and of many employers, are most likely not particularly supportive of the dual-career relationship. Thus, many such couples are left alone to deal with the changes which occur during this first year and with the implications of those changes for their relationship. In our experience as marital therapists, those relationships which are fairly stable, flexible, and in which there are good communication and negotiation skills emerge strengthened and more satisfactory to both partners. Relationships which are lacking these qualities tend to suffer continuing strain or break-up during the first year out. It is hoped that sensitivity on the part of professionals to the issues presented here, the willingness of present new dual-career couples to act as role models, and some proactive communication by each dual-career couples prior to their first year out will enable couples to productively use the first year as a growth-producing experience and one which enrichens their relationship.

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